DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 323 362 CE 055 733

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TITLE Direct Mail Marketing for Cooperative Education. Cooperative Education Marketing Digest Series 5.
INSTITUTION Cooperative Education Marketing, Inc., Kalamazoo, MI.
PUB DATE Aug 90
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cooperative Education; Field Experience Programs; *Marketing; Postsecondary Education; *School Business Relationship; Secondary Education; *Student Recruitment; Work Experience Programs
IDENTIFIERS *Direct Mail

ABSTRACT

Seven guidelines for enhancing direct mail marketing are as follows: target the most promising audience; frame the right message for the audience; state the benefits of making a positive response; send the message at an appropriate time; tell the reader what response is desired; plan follow-up mailings or other contact; and measure results. Suggestions for designing direct mail pieces include: (1) involving all experts at the earliest planning stages; (2) always including a cover letter; (3) targeting messages to each market segment; (4) keeping materials brief and direct; (5) highlighting the benefits that will be received rather than explaining the features of the program; and (6) evaluating what is working and what is not. A direct mail checklist identifies the objectives of the mailer, the mailing list, the frequency of use of the mailer, the costs, and the format. (CML)

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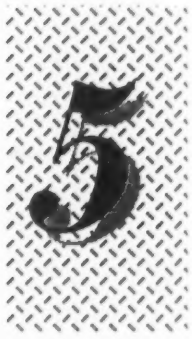
Cooperative Education Marketing
DIGEST SERIES

John W. Mosser, Editor; Terrence A. Taylor, Associate Editor

AUGUST



1990

Direct Mail Marketing for Cooperative Education

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> "For the cost of printing and postage, you can make thousands of contacts, explain the benefits of your co-op program, and request and receive a response."

WHAT IS DIRECT MAIL?

The best way to market just about any product or service is face-to-face contact, giving the client the full impact of your communication, including the tone of your voice, the expression on your face, and even the emphasis you add with hand gestures. When you are trying to reach hundreds or thousands of people, however, personal contact becomes overwhelmingly time consuming. This is why direct mail marketing is such an effective method of communicating with a large audience.

Direct mail is a marketing technique whose greatest strength is its "personal character." Even though you may send your direct mail piece to hundreds or thousands of people, you are still mailing a personal letter to each individual. For the cost of printing and postage, you can make thousands of contacts, explain the benefits of your co-op program, and request and receive a response. The process can be as simple as: (1) sending out a letter with an enclosed response card, (2) receiving the returned response cards, and (3) following up with the people who have expressed an interest in your co-op program. You've efficiently utilized time, energy and funds in order to contact a large pool of prospective students and/or employers.

DIRECT MAIL MARKETING: A DEFINITION

The Direct Marketing Association defines direct mail marketing in this way: "Direct Mail Marketing is an interactive system of marketing which uses mailed advertising media to effect a measurable response and/or transaction at any location" (Stone, 1989, p. 3).

WHAT IS IN A DIRECT MAILING?

The typical direct mailing packet includes a letter, a brochure about your co-op program, and a postage-paid response card. However, direct mail marketing offers the sender limitless options for what is included in the mailing such as letters, brochures, posters, post cards, or even a series of letters. Be sure to use a consistent graphic approach so that the person who receives your packet understands that all of the pieces in your mailing are related. "Some formats are better at transmitting facts, others excel at emotion. Match those strengths and use the tools that are most likely to bring about the action you seek" (Roehr, 1989, p. 3).

PLANNING IS IMPORTANT

The results of your direct mail effort will only be as successful as the planning you do. Kotler and Fox (1985) list seven guidelines for enhancing the effectiveness of direct mail.

1. *Target your most promising audience.* Take the time to develop or to purchase mailing lists that contain your target audience e.g. personnel representatives, students, or alumni.

2. *Frame the right message for the right audience.* In other words, know the characteristics of your audience. Your materials need to communicate that you understand their needs and that your co-op program can meet their needs.

3. *State the benefits of making a positive response.* People generally respond positively to a clearly stated benefit. Kotler and Fox (1985) point out that direct-mail pieces often reflect some confusion between features and benefits. Features are attributes of the program or institution; "The College is located downtown" is a feature; but "At ABC College you can hire students from around the country in

your own backyard" is a benefit. Benefits are often stated as testimonials from satisfied students or employers.

To clarify which benefits to offer, Kotler and Fox (1985) recommend that the co-op staff preparing the mailing answer questions like these: What benefits will people receive from participating in your co-op program? Why should a student or employer participate? What will they get out of it?

4. *Send the message at an appropriate time.* The best prepared message can be ignored if it is sent at the wrong time. Many co-op programs send out announcements eight weeks before a scheduled program. In this way, the message doesn't come so early that it is put away and forgotten, and not so late that the recipient has already made other plans.

5. *Tell the reader what response you want.* The letter and brochure should always state your desired response --what you want the reader to do-- whether it is to send for more information, write to request a co-op staff member make a visit, or reserve a space at an upcoming program. The response card should be easy to complete and should include return postage.

6. *Plan follow-up mailings or other contact.* Don't assume one mailing is enough. Many prospects will not respond until a second or third mailing.

7. *Measure your results.* This is the single most overlooked element in direct mail promotion. Only by keeping track of response rates can you determine which mailing lists and which letters or support materials were most effective. By keeping track of what is most effective you can achieve the best possible results in your future mailings.

> "The copy in your letter should be compelling, clear, and concise. However, remember to keep your message warm and friendly."

THE RIGHT LETTER

As you develop the text in your letter, keep in mind that your goal is to move your reader to action. Before you begin, consider the successful direct mail pieces you have read in the past. Think of what you like to read, and what you "file" after the first few lines. Then, ask yourself what you want to communicate most in your letter.

The text in your letter should be compelling, clear, and concise. However, remember to keep your message warm and friendly. The first paragraph should be powerful enough to win your reader's interest and encourage him or her to read on. Don't be afraid to push your reader's emotional buttons. Emotions are often the most important motivator in the decisions we make.

Here are some points to keep in mind when writing your text:

- Explain what your co-op program will do for the prospective participant,
- Tell what the prospect will lose if he or she does not respond,
- State your objectives clearly,
- Support your statements with evidence (i.e., quotes from students and employers already involved in your co-op program, or photos of happy students at work),
- Underline important words or phrases or set them apart on a separate line,
- Make an offer and provide a specific date to respond by,
- Emphasize important points several times,
- Jump right in with your offer, don't waste the first three paragraphs on introduction,
- Limit your letter to one page or two.

Remember to make it easy for your prospects to respond to your mailing. If you want the employer to fill out a form or card, provide a postage-paid envelope or

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postcard. If you want students to call, list a toll-free number in a prominent and visible spot. Many direct mail designers believe that direct mail packets that look like personal mail (personalized, typed address and inside heading as well as a first-class stamp) are more likely to be read.

THE RIGHT PERSON

After you've written a winning letter, you need to get it into the hands of the right person. If the wrong person receives it, it will most likely wind up in the circular file. Finding the right people isn't difficult, it simply requires planning. Who do you want to read your letter? You can find these people by using your own mailing list or by renting mailing lists from brokers and direct mail specialists.

Good sources for mailing lists are:

- The professional associations your staff belongs to,
- Regional, state, and national membership rosters from co-op, career planning, and personnel associations,
- The local chamber of commerce and economic development council,
- Local chapters of professional and service organizations,
- Alumni listings from your educational institution,
- The Registrar's office (for student lists).

The more specific you can be in your explanation of the benefits of co-op, the more information your prospective participants will have. It is better to segment your markets, to generate separate direct mail programs for students and employers. This allows you to customize your letters appropriately to your audience. Remember, different aspects of your program will be important to the different groups you contact. Be selective as you highlight the benefits of participating; emphasize economic and productivity-related benefits to employers, and career advancement possibilities to students.

In addition, avoid wasting time on hopeless prospects, that is, the kinds of students or employers you never get. Instead, devote time to developing a profile of the typical student and the typical employer who use your services. Then use these two profiles to identify other students and other employers who seem to fit your profile. Aim at getting more of the kinds of students and employers you already have.

DON'T FORGET THE ENVELOPE

When many of us do a mailing, we forget to use the envelope itself as a marketing tool. As Roehr (1989) points out, if the envelope doesn't succeed in its purpose (getting you to open it), not only has the package failed, the whole mailing has failed. "You should devote a disproportionate amount of time to your envelope. It is the one piece that the reader is sure to see in its entirety. Make it compelling, mysterious, personal, anything that will get the reader to open it and look at the contents" (p. 3).

WHEN, AND HOW MUCH TO MAIL

Certain months of the year are slower than others for receiving responses. Again, this is something that you can experiment with. Keeping careful records will help you to determine when and how many letters to mail. If you are working with a limited staff, making one large mailing may be overwhelming when the responses come in. A smaller mailing on a staggered schedule may be more suitable.

Don't enclose too much material, or you may reduce your response rate. However,

don't be afraid to send out a simple postcard three weeks after your initial mailing to remind the recipients to take the action you requested. The small additional investment this follow-up technique requires can dramatically improve your results.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU'VE GOTTEN A RESPONSE

Many direct mail projects fail after the responses have been received because there was no plan for follow-up. If you have offered to mail a brochure, make sure it is printed and ready to mail when you receive your first response. If you have promised to make a follow-up call, make the call as soon as you receive the response. And, if you have asked your audience to call you, make sure you have adequate staff to answer the phones, and that the staff know what to say before they answer the phone.

HOW MUCH WILL IT COST?

As with any promotional venture, the costs of direct mail marketing must be recorded and assessed. The costs may be easier for your organization to absorb if you spread them over a period of months. Direct mail marketing usually proves to be cost effective, especially considering the high costs of reaching people by phone or other advertising media such as radio, TV, or newspaper ads.

OTHER WAYS TO USE DIRECT MAIL MARKETING

Direct mail marketing is a valuable and cost-effective tool. Consider using this technique for the following cooperative education applications:

- Developing jobs with employers,
- Building and maintaining relationships with employers,
- Recruiting students into the co-op program,
- Informing students enrolled in the co-op program of new job opportunities,
- Sharing information with the families of co-op students,
- Contacting alumni to serve as speakers, employers, or financial donors.

SUMMING UP

Volkmann (1989) has developed 11 suggestions for designing direct mail pieces which are paraphrased here:

1. Involve all of your experts (writers, designers, sample students and employers) at the earliest planning stages.
2. Always include a cover letter.
3. Target your messages to each of your market segments (students, employers, alumni).
4. Find one great writer to craft the cover letter and all of the other publications in your mailing (including the envelope).
5. Keep your materials brief and direct.
6. Highlight the benefits students or employers will receive instead of explaining the features of your program.
7. Use "full color" printing, if you can.
8. Eliminate evidence of computer generated messages (labels, etc.).
9. Send everything in an envelope without a label — and with a stamp (not a postal indicia).
10. Always pay the return postage and for all phone calls.
11. Test. Test. Test. Take the time to evaluate what's working and what isn't .

“Don't be afraid to send out a simple postcard three weeks after your initial mailing to remind the recipients to take the action you requested.”

> "Many direct mail projects fail after the responses have been received because there was no plan for follow-up."

DIRECT MAIL CHECKLIST

In the following checklist, Hendrickson (1989) summarizes the highlights of this article. Feel free to use this as a guide in planning your own direct mail campaign.

1. Objectives of the mailer
   - Is the purpose to register through the mail?
   - Is the purpose to write for additional information?
   - Is the purpose to promote your co-op program or the institution in general?

2. The mailing list
   - When was your mailing list last updated?
   - Have you distinguished between "users" (those who might get involved with co-op) and "influencers" (those who might encourage others to get involved)? For example, students vs. their counselors or line employees vs. CEO's.

3. Frequency of use of your mailer
   - Will the mailer be used once?
   - Will it be part of a continuous campaign?

4. The costs
   - How much of your total budget does this mailing represent?
   - Is it worth the expected return?
   - What is the expected actual payoff?

5. The format
   - What form will the mailing take?
   - Will there be an enclosure(s)?
   - Will there be a return envelope or card?
   - Will the return postage be paid?
   - What kind of stock will you use?
   - What colors of ink will you use?

6. Miscellaneous
   - Have you prepared a layout and text appropriate for your objectives?
   - Have you obtained estimates on printing, engraving, addressing, and mailing?
   - Have you tested the mailing piece?
   - Have you established a code system to keep track of responses?
   - Will you record the responses?
   - Have you corrected the mailing list?
   - Have you provided for making prompt responses to registrations received or information requested? (p.18)

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